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"Overdosing Can Turn Grass Yellow"

Problems have been showing up in our most popular lawn turfgrass. Centipede was once known as the "poor man's grass" because of its low maintenance requirement. That perception has changed over the past few years because many homeowners are complaining of large, irregular dead areas that are showing up in their lawns.

The disorder characterized by these dead patches in centipede is known as centipede decline. This is an unscientific term, but is necessarily generic because we still don't know all of the reasons that a home lawn made up of centipede often begins to crash after a few years.

The fungus, *Gaeumannomyces graminis, var. graminis*, is usually found in association with centipede decline. This same fungus is also known to cause take-all root rot in St. Augustine and bermudagrass decline on golf courses.

Some serious investigation is underway. Scientists are looking at many factors and their influence on this disorder. These include soil pH, fertilization and other cultural practices.

In the mean time, there are several practices that can reduce the incidence of centipede decline or help to prevent its effects.

■ Avoid overfertilizing this grass. Centipedegrass does not tolerate high levels of nitrogen in the soil. Repeated, heavy doses can result in a dark green lush lawn for the first couple of years, but the grass usually begins to decline during year 3 or 4.

I have never seen centipede starve to death, but I have seen many lawns that suffer from excessive fertilization. Ironically, some of the best centipede is found in old neglected pastures, and a common recommendation for discouraging it from competing with other pasture grasses is to maintain a higher level of nitrogen in the soil.

■ High soil phosphorus levels in centipede lawns also brings on problems. Our soils in

sandy Gulf Coast locations, though not retaining some nutrients well, do hold phosphorus. Repeated applications of high phosphorus containing products can result in a build-up that ties up some of the minor elements making them unavailable.

■ Once established, centipede should be watered on an as-needed basis, rather than on a schedule. Daily watering is not recommended because it results in a shallow root system, excessively lush growth, more thatch buildup and greater susceptibility to diseases. In the absence of rainfall, two irrigations per week should be sufficient if one-half to three fourths of a surface inch of water is applied each time.

■ Centipede mowing practices can make or break a lawn. Mow often enough that no more than one-third of the total leaf surface is removed at any one time. Centipede growing at an acceptable rate should only need mowing about every ten to fourteen days.

Keep the mower blade sharp and set at a mowing height of 1½ to 2 inches. As the heat and stress of summer approaches, raise the cutting height by one-half inch. Recycle clippings by using a mulching blade or by mowing when the grass blades are dry and discharging them through the open side chute on the mower.

Question of the Week: I fertilized my lawn a couple of weeks ago and now there are yellow streaks throughout the yard. I expected the lawn to turn green instead of yellow. What happened?

Answer: Yellow streaks or spots sometimes show up soon after a heavy application of fertilizer. Often these symptoms are the result of minor elements being chemically bound due to excessive amounts of the major elements supplied by the fertilizer. Centipede grass is especially sensitive, and it is not unusual to see this condition in newly fertilized St. Augustine too.

Try an application of iron. This can be done by spraying with a liquid formulation or by applying a dry source of iron such as Ironite. If the problem is due to iron deficiency, the results of a treatment can be remarkable, turning the lawn green within a few days.